

A Journey Begins

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Imagine a track and field athlete, two months prior to the Olympics, the training endless, the physical and mental preparations exhausting because it is uncertain which event or events he will participate in. In addition, there is no destination, the geographical location yet to be determined. Family and friends adding inquiries daily, with all questions unanswered. Then, like water through an old pipe, a hint of information leaks it's way towards this athlete. Then another drop, and another, but alas, all seem to disappear like a shooting star on a clear night. He trains without relent in the face of despair. Finally he is given that crucial piece of information, the answer to the where and when, the athlete and family so thrilled they do not even mind the fact that the what, and the how are left in limbo.

This is the life of a US Navy Seabee, specifically a Seabee from NMCB 74, before deployment. A deployment that was supposed to be in sunny Spain, has turned into the battalion's second trip accompanying Marines to the Middle East in less than twelve months. To say that these troops have left several families disheartened, especially with the relentless news coverage of the potential dangers in Iraq, is a gross understatement. The queries unanswered are as numerous as the frantic heartbeats amongst loved ones when told their son/daughter or wife/husband will be in harms way. Where will we be? What will we be doing? Do we have to convoy through dangerous areas? Are there people in this country who would put a bullet in our back just as easy as they sit down for their morning prayer? Will we get hit with an Improvised Explosive Device (IED)?

Somehow, with empty answers and feelings as desolate as the desert itself, the strength and mettle of this Seabee battalion begins to appear like a water mirage when thirst is all that matters. The individual personalities shine, and Seabees find ways to laugh and smile while sitting hot and uncomfortable on a C-141 for twelve hours, crowded like Christmas Eve Mass, on their way to a country in need of their help and support in more ways than can be counted. The only question that matters anymore is 'Do I love my country'.

The battalion, now in country just West of Baghdad, begins to catch its stride. Its heartbeat synchronizes and a broken down, Iranian terrorist training camp transforms into a fortified, well organized Seabee camp. The very streets the old Iraqi Guard used to walk are now rolling with Hummers, MTRVs, and dump trucks carrying everything from wood to electronic equipment to medical supplies. Within days, a sand infested, decrepit place becomes a pleasant living space and an amiable working environment. Seabee magic spreads throughout the Marine camps, as several units begin asking for use of the varying array of expertise and equipment the Seabees bring to the field of operations. Many of the pre-deployment questions begin to find answers as the Seabees find a home in Central Iraq. With more requests for our services than we can answer, due to the fact that we do have to complete our own camp, the 'what' are we going to do becomes what are we not going to do, and the how, well, Seabees have been answering that question since WWII.

The pride one sees in the faces of these Operation Iraqi Freedom II Seabees does not go unseen. Their 'can do' attitude permeates any base they enter, especially here at Saint Mere, where enemy fire is a common occurrence off base, but has no effect on the dizzying amount of work being performed. Troops carry on as if they were in an Arizona desert, not one in the Middle East, without question or show of fear, knowing that the mission needs to be accomplished.